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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY REPORT - November 25, 2005

¶1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk over the past week.

Human Rights

¶2. New Life Church's Building is NOT a Cow Barn

On November 17, the New Life Church filed its third application for registration at the address of the former cow barn. This time, however, the church received a new "technical passport" (registration document) reclassifying the cow barn as a "building specializing in religious purposes." This allows the church to legally conduct services in the building. Separately, the New Life Church announced it would work in conjunction with the "Day of Solidarity" organizers, offering convocations on the 16th of every month for those persecuted by the GOB.

¶3. Belarus is an "Enemy of the Internet"

On November 16, Reporters Without Borders labeled Belarus an "enemy of the Internet" because of government attempts to control people's access to the web. The GOB can easily control web page content via the state telecommunications monopoly Internet access provider, RUP Beltelecom. On November 21, independent press reported the GOB bought equipment from China to monitor internet traffic.

¶4. Police Seize 700 Opposition Bulletins

On November 11 in Svetlogorsk, police seized from local youth activist Vadim Bogdan 700 opposition bulletins advertising the November 16 "Day of Solidarity". Police charged him with illegally using public transport to bring the bulletins from Minsk to Svetlogorsk, where 30 people participated in the day of solidarity.

¶5. GOB Will Not Block Foreign TV

On November 17, Lukashenko criticized foreign television programs for their violent content, but announced he would not block their broadcast. In turn, he praised Belarusian television channels for their truthful coverage and lauded Belarusian TV reporters as "decent, honest, and truthful," but lacking professionalism. Lukashenko also promised to continue to regulate the media sector, but in a civilized manner.

¶6. Restricted Travel

Belarusian border guards detained Union of Belarusian Poles (UBP) activists Andrei Pochubot and Meczyslav

Yaskiewicz for three hours at the border as they returned from Poland on November 19. The UBP activists were returning from a visit with Polish Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz when the guards confiscated their passports, claiming passports' exit stamps had been annulled. On November 23, border guards prevented UBP activists Angelica Arechwa, Andrei Lisowski, and Inessa Todryk from crossing the border into Poland. The guards allegedly doubted the authenticity of the issuer's signature in the UBP activists' passports. The activists were to travel in Warsaw to speak with a UN special rapporteur on Belarus.

17. Former UBP Head Questioned

On November 22, Grodno investigator Dmitry Labotsky questioned former UBP head Angelica Boris as a witness in connection with the alleged misuse of UBP funds. Since the case's reopening in January, Boris has been questioned 50 times. In a press statement, Boris claimed authorities are accusing her of misusing funds, stealing, and organizing a teachers' conference with sponsors' money. According to Boris, the investigators are using interrogations to put psychological pressure on her and her supporters.

18. Newspaper Appeals Registration

On November 18, editor of the satirical newspaper Navinki, Pavel Konovalchik, appealed to the Supreme Economic Court against the Ministry of Information's (MoI) decision to annul its registration. Deputy Minister of the MoI Liliya Ananich annulled Navinki's registration on October 24 for failing to publish an issue within the last 12 months. Konovalchik admitted

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his newspaper did not appear for 11 months, however the MoI also counted the three months when the newspaper was suspended by the MoI in August 2004.

19. Activist Fined for Leaflets

A Gomel district judge on November 21 fined opposition activist Maria Bogdanovich USD 95 for distributing leaflets on November 7 without the printer's name and address. Bogdanovich plans to appeal the ruling because of her doubt about the judge's impartiality. The leaflets, according to Bogdanovich, were designed to attract public attention to sharp increases in utility and maintenance service rates.

110. Narodnaya Volya Loses, Again

Judge Nelli Orlovskaya of the Minsk City Economic Court threw out Narodnaya Volya's (NV) lawsuit on November 21 against its former distributor Minoblsoyuzpechat, a subsidiary of Belsoyuzpechat, for abruptly annulling its distribution contract with NV. NV intends to appeal.

111. Milinkevich's Unsuccessful Meeting

Presidential hopeful Aleksandr Milinkevich arrived in Bobruisk on November 24 to meet with local activists and residents, hold a press conference, and answer residents' questions on a hot line. However, two hours before the scheduled events, authorities disconnected the electricity and phone connections in the apartment where the hot line was to take place. Bobruisk painters and theater actors, with whom Milinkevich was to meet, were prohibited from speaking to him.

Civil Society

112. Number of HIV Cases Approaches 7,000

On November 17, the National Center for Public Health announced that 6,867 Belarusians have been diagnosed with HIV. Gomel region has the highest rate of infection, with 3,821 reported cases. Intravenous drug use accounted for 67.6 percent of the cases. Deputy Minister of Health Mikhail Rimzha predicted the HIV infection rate would decrease within the next two years.

113. A New Writers' Union

The Union of Belarusian Writers (UBW) is planning to expel 53 members, including detective novel writer and MP Nikolai Cherginets, for attending a founding conference for a pro-government writers' union. Cherginets and his supporters created the new Union of Writers of Belarus (UWB), to which Cherginets was unanimously elected as the chair, after Cherginets stepped down as UBW's chair in disagreement over the union's alleged "nationalistic" stance. Lately, the state media has accused the 582-member UBW of practicing politics and not literature while Cherginets accused the union of not recognizing President Lukashenko or GOB symbols and using the nationalist red-and-white flag to "cause pressure" within the union. The Belarusian Confederation of Artistic Unions and Cultural Foundations fear the creation of the pro-government UWB would bring greater government harassment to the UBW and its eventual closure.

114. Symphonies in the Villages

Director of the Belarusian State Philharmonic Society Aleksandr Grabar on November 15 confirmed GOB plans to establish 215 philharmonic halls in villages under the 2005-2010 rural revival program. Grabar stated that the main difficulty in the project was that villagers were not yet able to "understand" symphony. However, the concert halls, which would be set up at village houses of culture, could also be used for other activities.

115. Regional Officials Punished

On November 21, the chair of the Mogilev Regional Executive Committee Boris Batura recommended the dismissal of the region's top official in charge of the state retail network for poor performance. The decision came following President Lukashenko's visit to the region and his criticism of local authorities' inability to improve living standards. Batura issued reprimands to four deputy chairpersons of the Mogilev Regional

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Executive Committee and other district-level officials. He also demanded district government heads hear complaints and requests from citizens at least once a week.

116. More Riot Police

OMON (riot police) regiment commander Yuri Podobed reported on November 22 that the country's 350-men strong OMON force would increase to 500 men. The move is to increase security at public events, such as football and hockey matches and concerts. According to Podobed, who is on an EU visa ban list for crushing demonstrations, claimed that 30 percent of OMON troops have university degrees and over 50 percent were college students. Only one in ten applicants pass the OMON entrance tests.

117. Lukashenko Will Not Take Money

On November 24, President Lukashenko told Parliament that the West was ready to offer him and his family

safety and money if he did not run in the 2006 elections. The president stated that he rejects such offers. Chairman of the upper house Gennady Novitsky expressed his concern about the West's political pressure, including its "unprecedented" attacks on Belarus' "independent" policy. Therefore, the GOB's task is to consistently advance national interests, spread objective information, and "show up" double standards. In a November 23 press conference, however, Lukashenko stated that he welcomes the positive direction Western governments are taking in recognizing that he will win the elections.

Election

118. www.milinkevich.org

On November 16, opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich launched his website, www.milinkevich.org. On the first day, the Belarusian language web page - Russian and English versions will be launched soon - had 1,200 hits. The site contains biographic and campaign information, interviews and articles, a photo gallery and documents on the National Congress of Democratic Forces.

Economics

119. Less Beer Produced

The deputy head of the state food processing company Belgospischemeprom, Aleksei Rubets, announced on November 16 that production targets for beer would be reduced from 72 million deciliters to 49 million deciliters. The decision came after 2005 beer exports fell 51 percent to 665,000 deciliters, although the 2006-2010 state plan expects 12 million deciliters of beer in exports in 2006. Less than ten percent met first-class requirements. The five-year program envisages doubled beer production by 2010, costing the state USD 139 million in investment.

120. Temporary Tariffs?

The Council of Ministers signed resolution no. 1263 on November 17, which raised import duties on various consumer goods for nine months in order to protect domestic producers. Import duties on paints and varnishes increased from five to 15 percent of their customs value, drills and vacuum cleaners from 15 to 50 percent, electric tea kettles from 15 to 20 percent, and lighting equipment from 20 to 30 percent.

121. Tax Arrears Increase

The Ministry of Taxes and Duties reported on November 18 that tax arrears increased 42 percent to USD 155 million in 2005. Unpaid VAT, excise tax, and sales tax (33, 26, and 14 percent respectively) accounted for most of the arrears. Delayed tax payments dropped 14 percent to USD 109 million. Tax revenues totaled USD 11.6 billion.

122. Construction Companies Under State Control

On November 22, PM Sergei Sidorsky insisted the GOB
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redistribute the construction market in the government's favor. According to Sidorsky, 20 percent of all facilities are built under state control while the remaining 80 percent is carried out by private companies. Sidorsky suggested, "turning the pyramid

upside down," granting the state 80 percent control and private companies only 20 percent. President Lukashenko will hold a meeting on December 20 to discuss this issue.

123. Average Salary Increases

The Minister of Economy Nikolai Zaichenko announced on November 22 that the average salary rose to USD 233 per month, up from USD 211 in January-October. The biggest salaries were in the petrochemical industry and the lowest in agriculture. Seven percent of companies in Belarus offer salaries below USD 100. According to Zaichenko, average December salaries in the healthcare, education, culture, and science spheres should total USD 236, 226, 226, and 333 respectively. The highest salaries remain in the oil refining industry, where workers earn USD 539 per month.

Quote of the Week

124. Lukashenko, at a four-hour November 17 speech to university students:

"We should not crave the European community, abandoning our national culture, traditions, and state structure. We are situated in the center of Europe, and will be able to establish the European living standards on our own. As true Europeans, we will not bend our neck.... Even the avowed enemies of Belarus, the IMF and the World Bank, have to admit that Belarus has chosen the right way of development."

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